

What Does It Take to Live a Profound Life?

Laura B. Holyoke, Katie Wilson, Ali Threet, Laila Cornwall, and Shawna Bertlin

University of Idaho

Abstract: The purpose of this literature review was to develop the profound living concept through a synthesis of themes extracted from scholarly literature. The problem encountered was a lack of theory and depth in the concept of profound living. The methods used in this study were a thorough literature review in which concepts were extracted from related theories and ideas related to profound living. Ego development theory was utilized as a framework to guide the exploration of living profoundly. This resulted in a conceptualization of profound living that integrates ideas from life narratives, eudaimonia, and wisdom. This cogent conceptualization of profound living should guide future empirical research on this topic.

Keywords: profound living, values virtues perspectives, eudaimonia, wisdom, narratives

This literature review develops a conceptualization of profound living utilizing the frame of profound learning. Well-known concepts in adult learning involve transformative learning, contextual learning, experiential learning, and the learning environment. These concepts tend to provide episodic profundity or even deeply meaningful moments but do not account for sustained depth over time. Kroth (2016) described a profound learner as “someone who pursues deeper knowledge regularly over time” (p. 29) making it primarily proactive and ongoing. Analogous to research found on profundity and profound learning (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2019), the profound living research is limited. The research team explored ideas similar to profound living, such as flourishing, flow, transformational, and the “good life,” well known in areas such as positive psychology. However, we found the ideas lacked a holistic view of development in adulthood and ongoing continuous elements we believe are encompassed in profound living.

Background

Through their profound learning exploration, Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2019) identified a lack of empirical research on profundity in general, and more specifically, lack of ongoing comprehensive theory-building regarding profundity or profound learning. The overall perception that continues to emerge is that profound learning engages a process of continually going deeper. Profound learning involves an increased openness to additional and never-ending knowledge attainment on a continuous basis rather than identified instances of transformative enlightenment. This level of profundity involves action and intentionality that we argue in our conceptualization for profound living.

In addition to utilizing the concept of profound learning, we searched for a theoretical framework to guide our conceptualization of profound living. We reviewed related theories including those developed by Loevinger, Maslow, Erickson, Piaget, and Freud. We chose Loevinger’s (1976) ego development theory (EDT) as an ideal framework for the conceptualization of profound

living. The framework informed a deeper understanding of human potential and the concepts of wisdom, perspective, values, eudaimonia, and narrative.

Loevinger identified nine stages of ego development—or understanding of self—that are considered key to human development potential towards deeper understandings and ways that self-identity evolves over time. The stages are in sequential order ranging from simple to complex and determine what individuals notice and become aware of (human consciousness). Stages are descriptions of individuals' ideal perspectives representing an integration of their inner and outer worlds. EDT primarily focuses on stages of adult development based on the constructivist perspective that individuals actively create their own reality through their relationship to challenges in life (Loevinger, 1976). EDT is also deemed a theory of meaning making, which is considered a fundamental drive of humans where the ego functions continuously to interpret and make logical sense of experiences.

Most commonly, individuals span three or four stages of ego development simultaneously, yet their levels of integration tend to be centered in one stage, termed *center of gravity* (Cook-Grueter, 2013). Center of gravity represents the ego maturity stage that an individual can reliably access. Growth happens most often within a stage, resulting in a broadening and depth of skills, information, and knowledge. Advancing to higher stages is less common and takes intentional, sustained effort. Individuals can also regress in stages, which can happen due to adverse circumstances or events.

This paper is organized as follows: the research approach and supporting framework; explanation of values, virtues, perspective, eudaimonia, wisdom, and narrative related to profound living; discussion conceptualizing profound living; and recommendations for future study.

Approach

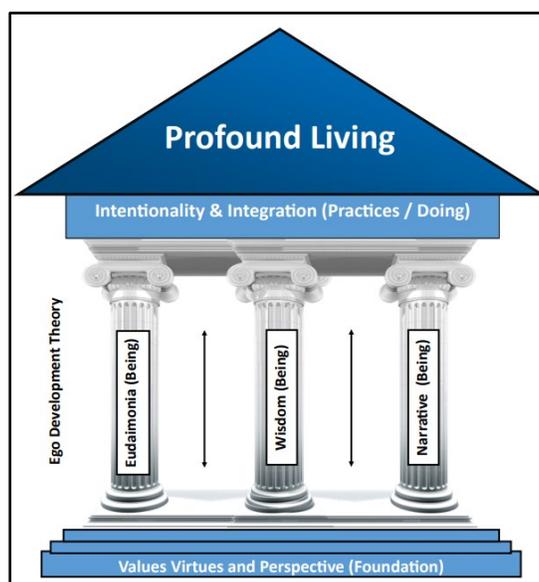
From the literature reviewed, mind maps were generated, connecting concepts of profound learning to profound living. Through collective consensus, we curated the concepts down to four pillars that recurred in the scholarly literature and we deemed essential to conceptualize profound living. These pillars include wisdom, eudaimonia, narrative, and value perspectives. Individual pillars identified remained consistent throughout our research with those identified in profound learning. The pillars dovetailed with stages of ego development aiding to explain human and adult development in relation to intentional becoming.

The depth of profound learning beckoned us to focus on a deeper exploration of concepts that related to profound living. This examination led to narrowing the four pillars down to three (eudaimonia, wisdom, narrative). Value perspectives was expanded into values, virtues, and perspectives and emerged as the foundation of our conceptualization. In light of profound living, a strong foundation provides the means for an individual to integrate the pillars and fluidly move through stages of ego development; thus, allowing for adaptation of intentional practices and living a life of profundity.

Major Themes

The foundation of profound living is made up of a person's values, virtues, and perspectives. Although these may change throughout a person's life, we recognized a strong foundation in these areas as vital to progress toward profound living. Having a good sense of values, virtues, and perspectives directly connects to the three pillars (being) of profound living (see Figure 1). Through EDT, we understand that a person continuously develops, introducing a sense of fluidity to the conceptualization.

Figure 1. *Profound Living Conceptualization*



Values, Virtues, and Perspectives

Values are basic and fundamental beliefs that guide or motivate attitudes or actions. In the Aristotelian sense, virtues are habits consisting of consciously choosing the golden mean between extremes (Hall, 2020). Perspective is a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something. Values, virtues, and perspectives tend to influence every aspect in life. They often motivate action and are essential in helping individuals navigate life and fully explore, challenge, and discover their own values, virtues, and perspectives. This complex and difficult journey oftentimes leads to an individual questioning what they have been taught as a child or challenging long-held beliefs. It refines and helps them move up the pillars and progress through the stages of EDT. A strong foundation of values, virtues, and perspectives deals with degrees of structural complexity and integration of personal meanings (Bauer et al., 2018).

Eudaimonia and Profound Living

The philosophical concept of eudaimonia originated from Aristotle, whose aim was to answer a fundamental question of human existence, which was “how should we live?” Aristotle stipulated that eudaimonia was not simply a search for happiness or achieving pleasure, rather it is the highest of all human goods and deemed activity of the soul in accordance with virtue; this, to

Aristotle was the heart of eudaimonia (Ryff, 1989). “Aristotle’s eudaimonia is thus characterized as living well, and entails being actively engaged in excellent activity, reflectively making decisions, and behaving voluntarily toward ends that represent the realization of our highest human natures” (Ryan et al., 2006, p. 145). Eudaimonia can be described as a human’s potential to flourish, going beyond matters of happiness (Sheldon, 2018).

Eudaimonia goes beyond “good living” or simply “living the good life.” It is the continuous process of living, changing, and growing with a sense of choice and freedom (agency). A good life embraces comfort and an overall sense of wellbeing, while eudaimonia contributes to profound living by embracing human thriving. Thriving includes individuals who push to do the difficult work of becoming their best, which involves self-awareness about their gifts and talents (McMahan & Estes, 2010) and understanding their role in the world (Ryan et al., 2006) while contributing to the greater humanity. Eudaimonia increases one’s capacity for perspective-taking and focuses on increasingly interdependent identity and universal-minded ethical reasoning (Bauer et al., 2018).

Wisdom and Profound Living

Wisdom is a deeper kind of knowledge that can only be gained through experience (Stulberg, 2018) and requires thinking complexly and deeply about life. It is a personality quality developed in life acquired through experiences—both good and bad—although not all experiences lead to wisdom. Knowledge becomes wisdom only after a person internalizes it (Ardelt, 2003). Wisdom development is determined by a person’s capability to utilize their advanced cognitive and emotional skills along with the ability to reflect on and integrate knowledge with experiences in a way that transcends “their self-centered interests to promote common good” (Ardelt et al., 2019, p. 145). Practicing wisdom means making conscious ethical choices through a deeper understanding of life that can only be gained through experience of incorporating complex thinking about oneself and others.

Bauer and colleagues argue that meaning making (capturing those things that are of critical relevance and value to the individual person) creates wisdom; and only through wisdom can one adjust objectively to difficult situations in life (2018). Wisdom is the process of profoundly contributing to the larger good for everyone and help create balance in the universe (Edmondson & Woerner, 2019) and encompasses an acute awareness and deep knowledge of self that results in objective and complex levels of nonjudging behavior and thought processes. Wisdom embodies an ability to cognitively understand life, reflect on experiences while taking different perspectives, and practicing compassion (Ardelt, 2003). Wisdom contributes to profound living through “knowing how to navigate one’s life (i.e., making choices, taking actions, interpreting actions) in ways that facilitate meaningfulness and psychological well-being for both the self and others” (Bauer et al., 2018, p. 93).

Narrative and Profound Living

Narrative is a conceptualization and creation of meaning through lived experiences. It is often thought of as a person’s life story and associated with the understanding of identity. “Narrative identity is a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and

imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). This act of creating meaning from lived experience represents a crucial dimension in profound living and is developed over a lifetime curated by stories conceptualized or told by an individual. Beginning in adolescence, people form and internalize their life stories (McAdams, 2001) and as stories accumulate, narrative identity is reinforced or evolves. These stories create an understanding of self, which creates awareness about how one fits within the world.

An individual’s choices and behavior are informed by their narrative and significantly impacts quality of life. Durrant and Ward explain:

Narrative identity is based on individuals’ conception of their lives and core commitments, and the implications this has for future lifestyle and actions. It essentially shapes persons’ lives, and by doing this, informs them of what characteristics they should cultivate, how to act, and what goals to strive for. (2015, p. 255)

Like any familiar story, chronicling life experiences allows for themes or patterns to emerge. Two themes relevant to profound living are growth stories and redemption narratives. A growth story is “a personal narrative that showcases one’s development or developmental processes” (Bauer et al., 2006, p. 86). Similarly, “in a redemption sequence, an emotionally negative life scene turns positive; the bad is salvaged or redeemed by a positive outcome” (Bauer et al., 2006, p. 85). Both growth stories and redemption narratives exemplify a process of “becoming” and therefore align with our conceptualization of profound living as “continuous creative integration,” or the process of “becoming.”

Discussion—Conceptualizing Profound Living

Using EDT as a framework helped anchor meanings from the pillars identified and contributed to sensemaking of adult development moving through different ego development stages. Each pillar was also identified as being present in the upper stages of EDT. No one pillar could explain or support profound living alone, yet each provided critical support towards the conceptualization of living profoundly.

Our conceptualization of profound living entails a continuous and creative integration of “doing” and “being.” “Doing” refers to our intentional actions or practices with self and others, while “being” refers to our personhood or personal identity (Koterski, 2001). Another way to look at the integration of “doing” and “being,” is the weaving of internal processes with external behaviors (the same idea of what is captured by identifying stages in ego development). As individuals continue to integrate eudaimonia, wisdom, and narrative (being), they adopt intentional practices (doing) into their life and their interactions with others. This process leads to living a truly profound life.

Profound living is an activity, not a destination. It is a trajectory of becoming. This is not a static state and individuals can fluidly move back and forth through the process. If their values, virtues, and perspectives change, they may start the process anew. Resembling profound learning, profound living stands as a *way of life* continually going deeper. Likewise, profound living

provides a level of continual depth, understanding, and further implementation to the fields of adult learning and positive psychology.

Next Steps

In this literature review, we identified concepts that reflected living deeply with intention, that combined with profound learning and EDT, we presented a conceptualization of profound living. We plan to continue exploring the concept of profound living by conducting empirical research using the profound living conceptualization introduced here. These studies will focus on interviewing individuals through narratives or life stories who demonstrate profound living and will allow us to explore and further refine the concept of profound living. It is our hope that this research will be of value to the field and invite study around the idea of living a profound life.

References

- Ardelt, M. (2003). Development and empirical assessment of a three-dimensional wisdom scale. *Research on Aging, 25*(3), 275-324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/164027503025003004>
- Ardelt, M., Pridgen, S., & Nutter-Pridgen, K. (2019). Wisdom as a personality type. In R. Sternberg & J. Glück (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of wisdom* (pp. 144-161). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108568272.008>
- Bauer, J. J., King, L. A., & Steger, M. F. (2018). Meaning making, self-determination theory, and the question of wisdom in personality. *Journal of Personality, 87*(1), 82-101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12381>
- Bauer, J. J., McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). Narrative identity and eudaimonic well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 9*(1), 81–104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9021-6>
- Carr-Chellman, D. J., & Kroth, M. (2019). Public school teachers' experiences of profound learning. *Andragoška Spoznanja, 25*(3), 107-123. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.25.3.107-123>
- Cook-Greuter, S. (2013). Nine levels of increasing embrace in ego development: A full-spectrum theory of vertical growth and meaning making [Unpublished Manuscript].
- Durrant, R., & Ward, T. (2015). *Evolutionary criminology*. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-397937-7.00001-x>
- Edmondson, R., & Woerner, M. (2019). Sociocultural foundations of wisdom. In R. Sternberg & J. Glück (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of wisdom* (pp. 40-68). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108568272.004>
- Hall, E. (2020). *Aristotle's way: How ancient wisdom can change your life*. Penguin.
- Koterski, J., & Teaching Company. (2001). The ethics of Aristotle (J. Koterski, Narr.) (Great courses [Audiobook]). Teaching Company.
- Kroth, M. (2016). The profound learner. *Journal of Adult Education, 45*(2), 28-32. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/23>
- Kroth, M., & Carr-Chellman, D. J. (2018). Preparing profound learners. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, 30*(3), 64-71. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20224>
- Loevinger, J. (1976). *Ego development: Conceptions and theories*. Jossey-Bass.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*(2), 100-122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>

- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society*, 22(3), 233-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>
- McMahan, E. A., & Estes, D. (2010). Hedonic versus eudaimonic conceptions of well-being: Evidence of differential associations with self-reported well-being. *Social Indicators Research*, 103(1), 93-108. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11205-010-9698-0>
- Ryan, R. M., Huta, V., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Living well: A self-determination theory perspective on eudaimonia. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9(1), 139-170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9023-4108>
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069>
- Sheldon, K. M. (2018). Understanding the good life. In J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister, *The Social Psychology of Living Well* (pp. 116-136). Taylor & Francis.
- Stulberg, B. (2018). An ode to being old. *Outside Online*. <https://www.outsideonline.com/2339366/benefits-getting-older-health-fitness-aging>